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# Contested Crossing of Missionary Borders William Fetler and the Russian Missionary Society in the Netherlands, 1931-1936

KOOS-JAN DE JAGER

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In August 1931, Anna Maria Ubbink (1905-1978), a member of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Calvinist Churches in the Netherlands, GKN), wrote an enthusiastic letter to Frederik Willem Grosheide (1881-1972).<sup>1</sup> Grosheide, a professor at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, was a leading theologian in the GKN. Ubbink expressed the gratitude she felt after coming in contact with the Russian Missionary Society (RMS), founded by the Latvian Baptist pastor William Andreyevitch Fetler (1883-1957), and she asked Grosheide to allow Fetler the opportunity to develop his activities in the Netherlands.

Fetler was a revivalist, mission director, editor, and writer. According to historian Albert W. Wardin, Fetler was “the most successful Baptist revivalist among Russians and Latvians in the Russian Empire and the Republic of Latvia” because he established the first non-denominational faith mission to reach Slavic people with the gospel.<sup>2</sup> In the

interwar period, he successfully built a transnational network in which he raised funds for his missionary enterprise. Ubbink wrote to Grosheide that her views on the work of the Holy Spirit had changed radically during a conference in London where she had learned about the missions of Fetler and the revivals in Russia. She expressed her wish to establish a bond of spiritual community between the Dutch and Russian Christians, saying that there were Dutch Christians with a special vocation to aid the coming of God’s kingdom in Russia. These individuals, she believed, needed to stand up in public and form a spiritual community.<sup>3</sup> In practice, she wanted to convene monthly prayer groups focused on spiritual support for the fellow Christians in Russia and to invite Fetler to come to the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Her intention was that this spiritual community would lead to the participation of Dutch Protestants in Fetler’s transnational network of support. Grosheide responded positively

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1 I am very grateful to Prof. Dr. George Harinck, the members of the NOSTER PhD Seminar Historical Research in Theology and Religious Studies and the anonymous referents of *Trajecta* for their support during the research for this article and for their comments on earlier versions of this text.

2 Wardin, “William Fetler,” 117.

3 Amsterdam, Historisch Documentatie Centrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme, Vrije Universiteit, *Archief F.W. Grosheide* (hereafter HDC), inv. no. 153: Letter of A.M. Ubbink to F.W. Grosheide, August 31, 1931.

to Ubbink, and together they took the initiative for planning the establishment of an Advisory Board for the RMS in the Netherlands.

Initially, Fetler's fresh interpretation of the issues surrounding the persecution of Russian Christians and the need to carry out missionary work with zeal, were welcomed by the Dutch people. Fetler's charismatic vision of a truly Christian Russia and his special concern for religious education of the Russians, impressed Dutch Protestants. A broad interdenominational coalition of orthodox Protestants followed his call to action. In 1931, Fetler and Ubbink arranged a series of public meetings, in which Fetler and other Russians spoke about the suffering of Russian Christians and in October 1932, the Advisory Board<sup>5</sup> for the RMS in the Netherlands was founded. Grosheide presided over the Board, chosen because of his influential role in the GKN.<sup>6</sup> Also present on the Board were representatives from the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church, NHK), Baptist churches and the Church of England.<sup>7</sup>

Fetler's committee in the Netherlands was loosely organized, floating on personal networks and mutual trust. His charismatic nature evoked broad sup-



William Andreyevitch Fetler (1883-1957).  
[Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, Kyiv, Ukraine]

port, not least financially. The first steps of Fetler in the Netherlands were accompanied by intense debates surrounding his personality, theological positions and alleged financial misdeeds. His critics, however, could not put forward convincing arguments against Fetler, thus managing to stir up tumultuous debates, but not Fetler's departure from

4 HDC, inv. no. 153: Letter of A.M. Ubbink to F.W. Grosheide, August 11, 1931.

5 This board is also called Council of Reference or *Comité van Inlichtingen*. The tasks of the Committee included giving advice to the active members of the RMS and responding towards questions from the missionary public or other (missionary) organizations.

6 HDC, inv. no. 69: Letter from F.J. Miles to F.W. Grosheide, December 30, 1931.

7 Members were: Prof. F.W. Grosheide, Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, GKN), Prof. M. van Rhijn, Utrecht (Utrecht University, NHK), Rev. W. Thomson (Amsterdam), Rev. F.E. Keay (Church of England, Amsterdam), Rev. J.C. Rullmann (GKN, Wassenaar), Rev. H.L. Both (GKN, Arnhem), Rev. J.W. Weenink (Baptist Congregation, Stadskanaal), Rev. J.E. van Arkel (GKN, Utrecht), Rev. K. Reiling (Unie van Baptistengemeenten, Hengelo), Rev. G. Ubbink (GKN Hersteld Verband, Utrecht), Mr. J.N. Voorhoeve (publisher in The Hague, informal leader of the Dutch 'Vergadering der Gelovigen'), Mrs. N. van Deth (The Hague), Mrs. A.M. Ubbink (secretary, sister of G. Ubbink), Mr. C. Visser (controller of accounts, The Hague).

the Netherlands. Nevertheless, even with the commitment of members of the RMS and the Advisory Board, Fetler failed to get sustained support in the Netherlands. Two years later, in 1934, the continuing debates led to the collapse of support for him in the Netherlands and the withdrawal of his religious representatives from the Advisory Board.

Central to this present article is how Dutch Protestants reacted to the religious impulse of William Fetler. What were the causes of the positive reaction to Fetler in 1932 and the withdrawal of support in 1934? How can we explain this change in opinion? I argue here that Fetler invited Dutch Protestantism to cross stable religious borders with his charismatic call to action. In the interwar period, international cooperation and contacts presented a most dynamic field for Dutch Protestants.<sup>8</sup> Initially, support for and membership in Fetler's transnational missionary network outweighed dogmatic differences. But in the summer of 1934, the differences between Fetler and the established Protestant elites became highly problematic, leading to a withdrawal of a significant number of followers from Fetler's community. In the end, support for the "own" Russian campaign of Oskar Schabert (1866-1936), a German Evangelical Lutheran missionary in Riga was preferred above supporting Fetler.<sup>9</sup> I begin by pointing to the Dutch engagement with Russian mission and charitable projects in the

interwar period. Secondly, I briefly capture the history of Fetler's missionary movement. Finally, I analyze the Dutch debates around Fetler's Dutch campaign and the causes of Fetler's exit from the Netherlands in 1936. I conclude by contrasting the opinions towards Fetler with Dutch opinions towards the Salvation Army and the American revivalist Frank Buchman (1878-1961), founder of the influential Oxford Movement. In this way, I hope to firmly place Fetler in historical perspective.

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## Dutch Protestants and the Russian mission

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The Dutch socio-cultural history of the early twentieth century is characterized by the emergence of "heavy communities" or "moral imagined communities."<sup>10</sup> The interwar period witnessed a high level of social and religious segmentation. Religious ideas and political worldviews were encapsulated in organizations that enjoyed a high degree of agreement from their members. Discipline and uniformity were central to the static field of established churches, and this led to effective social control and a powerful spirit of social and religious unanimity.<sup>11</sup> Due to the First World War, international cooperation and ecumenism were welcomed as long as they did not affect the established religious order

8 Harinck, "Het Nederlands protestantisme"; Id., "We may no longer restrict our horizon till one country."

9 Schabert was supported by the International Federation for Inner Mission and thus connected to the existing Dutch *Centraal Bond voor Inwendige Zending* (Central Union for Inner Mission).

10 Van Dam, *Staat van verzuiling*, 19; Van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes*, 32.

11 Eijnatten and Van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis*, 305.

in the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in a reaction against the optimism and rationalism of modern culture and the static religious landscape of the early twentieth century, people were searching for new inner experiences of religion outside of ecclesial structures. On the periphery of Dutch society, religious newcomers wanted to find their own place. Small religious movements arose such as the Salvation Army<sup>13</sup> or the Möttlinger Brethren<sup>14</sup> or Buchman's Oxford Movement.<sup>15</sup> The rise of these spiritual movements signalled that a reaction was brewing to the rationalist climate in the Dutch churches.<sup>16</sup> It was into this ferment that Fetler entered as an interesting religious newcomer in the Dutch society, acting on the periphery of Dutch Protestantism. From 1924 onwards, societies for Russian missions and charitable-aid campaigns for Russia operated in the Netherlands, and Fetler set out to find his own place in this religious and social context.

In the Netherlands, at least three committees were active in Russian mission and charitable-aid campaigns for Christians in the Soviet Union. The oldest committee was the Dutch department of the German missionary federation *Licht im Osten* (Light in the East, LIO). Established in 1918, the LIO federation collected money for the missionary activities and supported evangelical

Christians in the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> In the Netherlands, they published a paper *Uw Koninkrijk Kome* (Thy Kingdom come), edited by the GKN minister Frans Desselhuis (1897-1955).

The second committee was the *Comité voor Baltischen Ruslandarbeid* (Committee for the Baltic Action for Russia), working for the *Centraal Bond voor Inwendige Zending* (Central Union for Inner Mission, CBIZ). Among the board members of this committee were the Minister of Education, Johannes Theodoor de Visser (1857-1932), the Major of Amsterdam, Willem de Vlucht (1872-1945), and Grosheide.<sup>18</sup> Where LIO was primarily a missionary organization, the CBIZ-committee was focused on philanthropic aid. The committee was founded in 1929 at the request of the International Federation for Inner Mission and Christian Social Work, an organization in which Europeans pursued mission work inside Europe, and where German organizations were especially influential. These organizations combined charitable work among the lower classes of the European countries with evangelization campaigns.<sup>19</sup> In 1932, the Dutch politician Jan Rudolph Slotemaker de Bruine (1869-1941) was elected president of the Federation, which went on to support the charity campaigns organized by one of their German-Baltic members, pastor Oskar Schabert. Schabert was

12 Harinck, "Het Nederlands protestantisme."

13 Ringelberg, *Met de vlag in top*.

14 Aalders, "De receptie van het werk van de Möttlinger broeders."

15 De Loor, *Nieuw Nederland loopt van stapel*.

16 Aalders, "Geestelijke bewegingen in het Interbellum."

17 The Hague, Nationaal Archief, *Archief CBIZ* (hereafter NA), inv. no. 619: Press release on NECORUS, 1937. See on Licht im Osten: Zorn, *Farben der Geschichte*.

18 Amsterdam, IISG, *Archief CBIZ*, inv. no. 1: Circular O. Schabert and W. Gruehn on the need of Estonia and Latvia, May 1924.

19 Röper and Jüllig, *Die Macht der Nächstenliebe*.

the minister of the German Evangelical Lutheran church in Riga and supported religious communities living with Soviet oppression and religious persecution. His organization *Baltische Rußlandarbeit* (Baltic Action for Russia) sent food packages to these populations. Schabert also organized missionary activities in the border areas between the Baltic states and Soviet Russia.<sup>20</sup>

On July 14, 1934, representatives of the CBIZ, LIO and a few individuals such as the anti-communist Rotterdam NHK-minister Frederik Johan Krop (1875-1945) and Jan Ernst Lasterie (1894-1943), formed a partnership.<sup>21</sup> The aim of this partnership, which operated under the name NECORUS (abbreviation of *Nederlands Comité tot steun der Christenen in Rusland*, the Dutch Committee for support to Christians in Russia), was to create a joint approach in Dutch relief and missionary work for Russia. Where formerly two committees competed for the favor of the Dutch philanthropic public, this single committee aimed to bring clarity and unity. In the press release written by Grosheide and CBIZ-director Maurits Carel Théodore van Lennep (1884-1956), the federation's primary goal was defined: "...the alleviation of the material need of Christians in Russia."<sup>22</sup>

In 1935, Krop sharply criticized the other board members of NECORUS.

According to him, it was not possible to support Russian Christians materially without condemning Communism as an anti-Christian ideology. Krop said that sending food packages to Russia, but doing nothing more, was not the type of spiritual and political support needed by Christians oppressed by Communists. He and Lasterie ended their cooperation with NECORUS and went on to found the *Landelijk Werkcomité Dr. O. Schabert* (National Working Committee Dr. O. Schabert). Supported by this committee, Krop published hundreds of pamphlets against the godlessness of Communism and organized international conferences on the subject of the persecution of Russian Christians.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Krop called for money and spiritual support for the work of Oskar Schabert. NECORUS, however, rejected the approach that included religious-political propaganda against Communism. They opted for a strict separation between political propaganda and religious relief work. They reasoned that such a separation was necessary because the Soviet regime prohibited organizations that opposed Communism. Soviet action prohibiting the German organization *Brüder in Not* (Brethren in Need), formed a specter for the board of NECORUS. Krop, nevertheless, persisted in his political action

20 Katterfeld, *Oskar Schabert*; Bitter, "Oskar Schabert."

21 The committee was chaired by Prof. Dr. F.W. Grosheide. Initially the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs, Prof. Dr. J.R. Slotemaker de Bruine was appointed chairman, but because of political tensions between Russia and the Netherlands, he no longer could associate himself with an organization directed to support Russians. Secretary was Jhr. M.C.T. van Lennep. Treasurer was G. Streithorst. Moreover, Miss E. Barth-van Marle, Dr. W.G. Harrenstein, Rev. H. Jansen and Prof. Dr. J.W. Pont were seated in the committee. The Secretariat was housed at Stadhouderskade 137 in Amsterdam. A Committee of Advice and Control was established by the *Centraal Bond voor Inwendige Zending*, staffed by Mr. B. de Gaay Fortman, Mr. G.P. Haspels, and D.G.J. Baron van Heemstra. NA, inv. no. 619.

22 NA, inv. no. 619: Press release "Samenwerking in den Ruslandarbeid," 1931.

23 See for his life: *Als ziende de onzienlijke*.





Founders of the Baltic Action for Russia, Eduard Steinwand (1890-1960) (left) and Oskar Schabert (1866-1936) (right) in Rotterdam, visiting Cornelis Adriaan Hodde (1882-1956) (middle) member of the *Landelijk Werkcomité* Dr. O. Schabert and colleague of Frederik Johan Krop, July 1934. [HDC VU 775, inv. no. 8]

against Communism, eventually caused a fracture between NECORUS and the National Working Committee in 1935.<sup>24</sup> Up to 1937, the year NECORUS was abolished, the friction between Krop and NECORUS continued. It was in this tense atmosphere, where different appeals for relief work in Russia competed for the favor of the Dutch public, that Fetler set to work to raise funds for his missionary society.

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## William Fetler and the Russian Missionary Society

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William Andreyevitch Fetler<sup>25</sup> was born in 1883 in Talsi, in the Russian Governorate of Courland.<sup>26</sup> It was there that he experienced spiritual rebirth at the age of fifteen. He was called to do evangelical missionary work among the Russian people, who in his view suffered great spiritual need. From translated sermons that circulated in Russia, Fetler knew

24 Amsterdam, Stadsarchief, *Archief CBIZ* (hereafter SA), box 61: Letter of CBIZ to J.R. Slotemaker de Bruïne, Augustus 30, 1934. NA, inv. no. 619 holds the extensive correspondence on these matters.

25 In 1940, at the time of his naturalization in the United States, Fetler officially adopted his pen name Basil Malof. Wardin, "William Fetler," 124; Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, 13.

26 Talsi (German: Talsen) was part of the Republic of Latvia between 1920 and 1940 and after 1991.

about the theology of the British Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892). Without any experience in English or theology, Fetler was accepted at Spurgeon's College in London.<sup>27</sup> During his years at Spurgeon's College, Fetler was impressed by the importance of the Welsh revival of 1904-1905.<sup>28</sup> The young Fetler experienced a quickening of his spiritual life and was captivated by the work of the Holy Spirit and the life-changing power of the gospel. The importance of the lower classes in the Welsh revival had its influence on Fetler, who, during his active missionary life, focused his message on the Russian proletariat in the cities.<sup>29</sup>

In 1907, Fetler started missionary campaigns in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where he worked among students, aristocrats and working people. After three years preaching in St. Petersburg, his meetings became so large that he decided to build the Dom Evangelia to seat 3,000 people. In 1914, Fetler was sentenced to lifelong exile by the Czarist government because of his continuing sermons against the decadence of Czarist society and the moribund nature of the Orthodox Church.<sup>30</sup> During the First World War and the first years of the Bolshevik revolution, Fetler coordinated his missionary work while travelling in Europe and the United States. In 1923, he was able to return to Riga, which had become the capital city of Latvia. In Riga he built the Salvation Temple, at the cost of \$100,000. In the early 1930s,

however, due to the constitutional crisis and the authoritarian government of Kārlis Ulmanis, Fetler left Latvia again for Sweden, making his living from musical performances of an ensemble made up of his thirteen children. He also started missions among Russians in European capitals, for example, in Paris.

In London, Fetler had been trained as a mission preacher, focused on transforming the lives of common people by instilling a belief in the gospel and Jesus Christ. His "urban rescue ministry,"<sup>31</sup> was modelled along typical revivalist lines. Nobody knew in advance how long the service would last; the atmosphere was emotional. The gospel services in St. Petersburg – and later in Riga – were the scene of large numbers of conversions. James Alexander Stewart (1910-1975), a close friend of Fetler, offers a lively description of a service in the Salvation Temple. Pastor Fetler is depicted as a general, training an army to invade Satan's Kingdom. "Nobody bothered about the clock. Nobody wanted to leave." Surrounded by an orchestra, a choir of one-hundred "Spirit-filled voices" and associate preachers, Fetler gave a sermon, cried and sang before the assembled crowd, his "mighty soul saving army...What a sight for the angels to behold – hundreds of Russians, Latvians, Poles and Germans flat on their faces before God in humility and brokenness." The end of the service was coupled with an invitation to sinners to come to the front and respond to the Lord. "There

27 Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, 20; Randall, *A School of the Prophets*, 127.

28 Jones, "Reflections on the Religious Revival in Wales."

29 Fetler, *The Thunderer*; Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*; Raber, *Ministries of Compassion*, 113-143; Wardin, *On the Edge*, 324-354.

30 Fetler, *The Thunderer*, 67-69.

31 Raber, *Ministries of Compassion*, 113-143.



is an immediate response. There are ninety or more there in the attitude of praying....There seems no let-up in the power of the meeting. The glory of the Lord is so real that it is with great difficulty that the service is brought to a close.”<sup>32</sup>

Fetler’s theology was related to several religious movements from all over the world. He was influenced by the Holiness Movement and had connections with leaders of the Apostolic Church. Baptism with the Holy Spirit was a crucial feature of his theological views. For Fetler, Jesus Christ had to become personal for a sinner, and he encouraged sinners to desire and work toward a holy and pure life. In his *Fundamentals of Revival*, Fetler argued for a new notion of revivalism in Christian churches, which he considered the only normal Christian experience. For him, an unrevived church was living below the normal state of spiritual health. According to Fetler, “genuine spiritual revival is the natural result of the meeting and carrying out of definite conditions laid down in the Word of God, just as an electrician would go about his business, doing this, number one, that, number two, etc., and then-just turn on the switch, and the natural outcome will be Light.”<sup>33</sup> Fetler explained that like natural laws, revival was always reached by fulfilling three requisites: an attitude of obedience towards God and his Word, repentance and breaking with sin, and a complete change of tastes, views and

aims of life.<sup>34</sup> His view was that such a “genuine Heaven-born Revival will result in a general increase of holiness and righteousness in the lives of the people affected.”<sup>35</sup> Fetler thought the Christian community was expected to live in holiness before the Lord and in this way they would obtain the blessings of the Spirit, without which they could not call themselves Christians.<sup>36</sup>

On the international Christian scene, Fetler represented himself as an orthodox Protestant, and an anti-communist missionary searching for transnational alliances. In the USA, Fetler was horrified by liberal theology and wrote a critical reply to modernist theologians. He argued that the foundation of the Russian Bible Institute in the USA, where missionaries were trained, was a reaction against the modernist theology in American churches and mission societies.<sup>37</sup> With his RMS, Fetler tried to create bonds of financial and spiritual support. As a charismatic leader, he attracted Protestant theologians from different denominations in Europe, Canada and the United States thus placing him within the historical expansion of international Christian networks after the First World War. His message of practical work for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ activated many to give their lives to Christ. In this political-religious context, Christianity was presented as an international anti-communist power and the struggle of Western Christianity was no longer seen as being against

32 Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, 101-109.

33 Fetler, *The Fundamentals of Revival*, 31.

34 Ibid., 31-33.

35 Ibid., 49.

36 See for his attitude towards Pentecostalism: Teraudkalns, “William Fetler.”

37 Fetler, *How I Discovered Modernism*. Cf. Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, 81-85.



*William Fetler preaching.*  
[Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, Kyiv, Ukraine]

dissenting people, but rather, against an international atheistic ideology.<sup>38</sup> During his life, Fetler was busy organizing meetings, publications and campaigns for Christ. His “Achilles’ heel,” however, was his unpredictability and tough attitude toward cooperation, characteristics that were evident even to his most loyal fellows in the RMS.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Fetler succeeded in creating a transnational network among Christians in Europe and the United States all of whom supported his missionary initiatives and relief work among Russians in Russia, the Baltic States and Russian immigrant groups in European capital cities like Paris.<sup>40</sup>

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## Contesting the borders of mission

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By the time Fetler arrived in the Netherlands at the invitation of Mrs. Ubbink, a “missionary public” existed that aimed at material and spiritual support for Christians in Russia. The concept “missionary public,” introduced by Catherine Hall, is conceived of as a public sphere in which men and women participate by supporting missionary ventures. The key to membership in a missionary public was “commitment to converting the hea-

38 Cf. De Jager, “A Mighty Soul-Saving Army Against Communism.”

39 HDC, inv. no. 371: Report Krop, “De actie van Pastor W. Fetler in Nederland en wat daarover in de bladen werd geschreven,” 1932.

40 In Riga, Fetler’s legacy is still present in the recently renovated William Fetler Building of the Latvian Bible Centre, which is housed in the headquarters of the RMS opened by Fetler in 1924. See <bible.lv> (accessed July 2, 2018).

then, whether at home or abroad.”<sup>41</sup> In the Netherlands, this public was ready to be called upon for missionary action and an example of this type of commitment can be found in the *Leeuwarder Kerkbode*, by teacher J. van Dijk who published a stream of notices about collected money for the Russian mission.<sup>42</sup> The Russian mission was supported by a Dutch community known as the “friends of mission,” who were, in turn, part of a transnational, European “missionary public,” created and nourished by a continuing stream of publications by, none other than, William Fetler.<sup>43</sup> Dutch newspapers had paid some attention to Fetler’s work. And among Dutch schoolmasters Fetler’s Russian work was especially widely known and appealing. Pedagogical journals like *De School met de Bijbel* and *De Onderwijzers*, but also missionary journals like *De Gemeenschapsbode*, and the Dutch daily newspaper *De Nederlander*, published articles about Fetler’s action and the debates around his work. The missionary public, and especially Dutch teachers, played a crucial role in Fetler’s acceptance in the Netherlands.

Between 1931-1933, Fetler travelled around Europe, and visited the Netherlands. He organized his first meeting in the Netherlands in 1931, together

with the Russian missionary Natalie Grushenkova and his brother Robert Fetler (1892-1941). At these meetings the leaders tried to reach the Dutch missionary public with their songs and stories about their lives in Russia and Siberia. They published advertisements in Dutch newspapers and special information-issues of the journal *De Zendingsecho*, issued by the Dutch section of the RMS. According to the CBIZ, Fetler was especially influential in lower-class social circles, where he raised large sums of money.<sup>44</sup> His breakthrough in the Netherlands was immediately accompanied by fierce debates on his reliability, fueled by existing international controversies around Fetler’s personality and alleged financial malpractices. Two years before Fetler’s breakthrough in the Netherlands, two successive boards of the American section of the RMS resigned due to Fetler’s financial policies.<sup>45</sup> The Canadian support for Fetler fell away in 1930. Thomas Todhunter Shields (1873-1955), pastor of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto, concluded after a short joint funding campaign with Fetler for the RMS, “Pastor Fetler is obsessed with the idea that he is a great business man. Had he confined himself to preaching, he would have saved himself and a lot of his friends a great deal of trouble... It is not

41 Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 292-294.

42 *Leeuwarder Kerkbode*. *Officieel Orgaan ten dienste van de Gereformeerde Kerken in de Classis Leeuwarden*. See for example the year 1934 for numerous small articles about the Russian mission.

43 See for example the RMS-journal *Friend of Missions* (in Dutch *De Russische Zendingsvriend*) with a section of “Trials and Triumphs from the Mission Field” where letters and stories about the religious revival in Russia were shared with the international missionary public.

44 NA, inv. no. 617: Letter CBIZ to the Rijksdienst der Werkeloosheidsverzekering en Arbeidsbemiddeling, November 14, 1934.

45 NA, inv. no. 616: Open Letter of the Russian Missionary Society, American Section, December 23, 1929. Cf. Announcement of the Russian Missionary Society, Inc. on the position of Fetler.

hyperbole to say that the pope himself could scarcely be more convinced of his own infallibility than is Pastor William Fetler. At the proper time and place we are prepared to give details, but we write this note merely to say that we have absolutely no confidence in Pastor Fetler's ability to handle money."<sup>46</sup> These international debates were used by Fetler's Dutch critics to attack his position in the Netherlands.

In October 1931, based on Oskar Schabert's warning for Fetler's malpractices in his church bulletin, the CBIZ published a press release in the Dutch newspapers in which they warned against Fetler's meetings. According to Schabert, Fetler was not reliable because of the accusations of financial misconduct, the dictatorial way Fetler responded to these accusations and the misrepresentations of the work of Schabert by Fetler. Schabert contended that Fetler's labor was not "real work for Russia" at all, because Fetler worked mostly among Russians in Paris and other European capitals. By contrast, Schabert's missionary work was focused on Riga's urban population and his aid projects centered mostly on German-Russian Christians in the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the first warning, the CBIZ did more research on Fetler's Dutch action, for example,

by consulting Shields.<sup>48</sup> Fetler reacted critically and immediately threatened with lawsuits.<sup>49</sup> The CBIZ revoked their warning against Fetler because they did not have the facts to prove their allegations. One of the reasons for the discord between Fetler and Schabert was the question of ethnicity. Both lived in Riga, but Fetler had a Latvian background and Schabert a German-ethnic one.<sup>50</sup>

Frederik Krop opposed revoking the CBIZ-warning, trying to provide sufficient factual proof of Fetler's untrustworthiness. In June 1932, Krop finished writing his "Confidential Report" on Fetler's Dutch campaign.<sup>51</sup> By writing this, he stated, he hoped "to exterminate the parasites from the Lord's vineyard with everything in his power." At the same time, he vigorously defended Schabert in the rivalry between Schabert and Fetler. Basing himself on testimonies from Schabert's representatives in the Latvian Baptist Union, Bishop Kārlis Irbe (1861-1934) and Paul B. Anderson (1894-1985)<sup>52</sup>, Krop argued that Fetler was unreliable. Krop wrote that, in the first place, Fetler was authoritarian in his actions and could not handle criticism. According to Charles Phillips, the London treasurer-in-chief of the RMS, Fetler organized his campaigns in a haphazard and impulsive manner, based on divine

46 NA, inv. no. 619: *The Gospel Witness*, June 5, 1930.

47 NA, inv. no. 616: Letter of G.J.K. Baron van Lynden van Horstwaerde to Dutch editorial boards, October 10, 1931. Based on an article of Oskar Schabert in the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenblatt für die Deutschen Gemeinden Lettlands* no. 27, 1931.

48 NA, inv. no. 616: Press release of Baron van Lynden, November 11, 1931, and letter of T.T. Shields to Baron van Lynden van Horstwaerde, November 3, 1931.

49 NA, inv. no. 616: Letter of W. Fetler to the CBIZ, November 12, 1931.

50 See Kalnins, *Latvia*, 123-140 for the ethnic conflicts in the Republic of Latvia.

51 HDC, inv. no. 371: Rapport Krop, "De actie van Pastor W. Fetler in Nederland en wat daarover in de bladen werd geschreven," 1932.

52 Representative of the Russian Service in Europe of the Young Men's Christian Association.

visions and messages, instead of long-term management. Furthermore, Krop mentioned that Fetler viewed dissent as a form of conflict. In this context, Krop concluded by saying that Fetler went to Riga after Schabert's warnings in 1931 and threatened Schabert with lawsuits.

As well, Krop accused Fetler of propagating half-truths about his campaigns for the Russian mission. He noted that the RMS worked mainly in European cities, and very few RMS missionaries actually worked in Russia itself. Fetler countered by stating in his publications that the RMS did extensive missionary work in Petrograd and Moscow.<sup>53</sup> Krop was also dissatisfied with Fetler's attitude towards other missionaries. Fetler was, according to Krop, a contrarian by his very nature. In cities like Paris, Fetler started his own missionary activities next to existing initiatives which were criticized by him. Meanwhile, Bishop Irbe stated that there was no "Fetler-revival" in Riga and that Fetler only attracted Christians from other churches. Fetler took a critical position toward these churches. For example, in 1927, he announced that the theologian who could find evidence in the Bible for infant baptism, would receive 1 million roubles.<sup>54</sup> This announcement led to a fierce debate in Riga. In conclusion, Krop cited the judgment of Anderson who had stated that, on the one hand, Fetler shows great Evangelical enthusiasm but, on the other hand, his enthu-



Frederik Johan Krop (1875-1945).  
[Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 4031\_P-007235-2]

siasm could not be disentangled from his own person. To Anderson's mind, Fetler was a person whom "psychologists would have no great difficulty in analysing."<sup>55</sup>

1934 meant a new phase in Fetler's campaigns in the Netherlands. Instead of only raising funds for his missions, he started a Dutch revivalist campaign. Numerous meetings were organized all over the country, in which Fetler delivered charismatic lectures and collected money for his organization. In June 1934, a missionary conference was organized in Amsterdam, under the

53 See for example: *Zendings Echo van Evangelisatiewerk onder Russen en andere volken in Rusland, Oekraïne, Madsjoerije, Polen, Letland, Boelgarije, Frankrijk, Zwitserland en Z.-Amerika*, March 1933.

54 HDC, inv. no. 371: Rapport Krop, 7. The citation is from the *Rigasche Rundschau*, April 28, 1927.

55 HDC, inv. no. 371: Rapport Krop, 7. See also T.T. Shields, "Pastor William Fetler. An Amazing Religio-Psychological Phenomenon. An X-Ray Examination by the Editor," *The Gospel Witness*, April 9, 1931.





Frederik Willem Grosheide (1881-1972).  
[HDC VU, 111, inv. no. 35]

slogan “100% for Christ.”<sup>56</sup> Some months earlier, the newspaper *De Rotterdammer* described Fetler as a tireless warrior for the kingdom of Christ, who had a large following.<sup>57</sup> Fetler tried to strengthen his revival campaign by settling in Amsterdam. In September 1934, Fetler and his family got a temporary visa good until August 1935.<sup>58</sup> They lived in Amsterdam, where Fetler bought hotel Stadt Elberfeld in the inner city (Oudezijds Achterburgwal 141) for 61,000 Dutch guilders. This he transformed into his Dutch mission-

ary headquarters complete with a Bible School, a missionary choir and a Sunday school.<sup>59</sup>

Fetler’s Dutch revival put Grosheide, his main supporter from the Dutch religious elite, in an inconvenient position. In a series of letters in May and June 1934, Grosheide and Krop expressed their feelings on Fetler’s Dutch campaign. According to Krop, Fetler had received a “voice” from the divine that prompted him, after Latvia, England and America, to activate a revival in the Netherlands.<sup>60</sup> Based on this idea of divine inspiration, in July 1934, Fetler organized the first *Overwinningseven*-conference in Woudschoten. The conference was aimed at the fulfilment of the needs of Dutch Protestants, who longed for a life of spiritual victory and liberation. The keynote speaker of the conference was Fetler himself. Special periods during the conference were devoted to praying for repentance and conversion.<sup>61</sup> Krop strongly criticized Fetler for, what he considered, his misleading behavior. Krop reproached Fetler for raising funds for the Russian mission and then using this money in the Netherlands for his revival movement and conferences. According to Krop, this was the direct opposite of the real Russian mission of Schabert. Grosheide, meanwhile, would not drop his support for Fetler. He had no doubts about Fetler’s orthodoxy. As

56 HDC, inv. no. 371: Poster missionary conference, June 1934.

57 “Interview met Pastor W. Fetler,” *De Rotterdammer*, April 25, 1934. Also published as *Pastor Fetler van Rusland door de oogen van een Nederlandsch journalist*, 1934. Zendingsbibliotheek no. 1

58 NA, inv. no. 617: Letter of the Rijksdienst der Werkeloosheidsverzekering en Arbeidsbemiddeling to CBIZ, November 12, 1934.

59 NA, inv. no. 616: Report concerning the Russian Missionary Society issued by the Central Archive and Information Office, n.d.

60 NA, inv. no. 619: Letter of F.J. Krop to F.W. Grosheide, June 15, 1934.

61 Cited in *De Reformatie*, July 6, 1934.



a Calvinist theologian, he could find no reason to make a theological objection against the principles of the RMS. For example, every member of the RMS had to sign the following declaration: "I the undersigned, hereby declare that I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, and that on the ground of the Word of God and witness of the Spirit I have assurance of being born again..."<sup>62</sup> For Grosheide, Fetler, a Baptist influenced by Spurgeon, was even more orthodox than Schabert, who was a Lutheran. He wrote Krop that he had made it clear to Fetler that he did not appreciate his Dutch revival movement, yet he did not drop his support. Krop was not convinced by Grosheide's considerations and wrote:

In last resort, the trust the RMS still enjoys depends on your moral voice. You have the love and esteem of the Reformed public and they are transferred to Fetler because of you. Do you know what that means? Fetler has had a "voice," that he, after having worked in Latvia, England and America etc. etc., now has to initiate a "revival" here. You guarantee his orthodoxy. But others say, when they hear him or read his work: "What kind of spiritual fuss is this?" (Will I

not collide with a law article here?) In Groningen, a prominent member of the GKN told me: "The man has talked about his own conversion for three hours, but of what we came, we heard very little." Is this in the spirit of Calvin: Nothing for man, everything for God? But... if Fetler decided to restrict himself to his revival meetings, I would not say anything about it. I only would regret that the spiritual taste of our religious public is so spoiled.<sup>63</sup>

Krop's arguments, however, did not change Grosheide's opinion. Between 1931 and 1934, no official meetings were held between Krop and Fetler because Krop persisted in his refusal to meet Fetler. The London representative of the RMS, Frederic James Miles criticized Krop's Report and behavior, "I must confess that I am absolutely astounded to find that you, having issued a Report which whatever may be true in Dutch law, in this country would render you liable to a Civil action for libel or defamation of character, are unwilling to meet me face to face so that your misconceptions may be cleared up."<sup>64</sup> Grosheide continued to meet both Fetler and Krop, in an attempt to mediate and solve the problems raised

62 NA, inv. no. 619: Letter of F.W. Grosheide to F.J. Krop, May 3, 1934.

63 "In laatste instantie, hangt het vertrouwen dat de RMS nog geniet van Uw moreelen stem af. Gij hebt de liefde en de achtting van het gereformeerde publiek en die worden om Uwentwille op Fetler c.s. overgebracht. Beseft gij wat dat betekent? Fetler heeft een "voice" gehad, dat hij ná Letland, Engeland, Amerika enz. enz. te hebben bewerkt, nu ook hier een "revival" moet bewerken. Gij staat in voor zijn orthodoxie. Maar weer anderen zeggen, als ze hem hooren of leezen: "Wat is dat voor geestelijke poespas?" (Kom ik hier niet in botsing met een wetsartikel?) Te Groningen werd mij door een vooraanstaand lid der Gereformeerde Kerk gezegd: "De man heeft drie uur over zijn eigen bekeering staan praten, maar van hetgeen waarvoor wij gekomen waren, hoorden we al bitter weinig." Is dat in de geest van Calvijn: De mensch niets, God alles? Maar... als Fetler zich bepaalde tot z'n opwekkingsmeetings, ik zou er niets van zeggen: ik zou alleen betreuren dat de geestelijke smaak van ons godsdienstig publiek zoo wordt bedorven." NA, inv. no. 619: Letter of F.J. Krop to F.W. Grosheide, June 15, 1934.

64 HDC, inv. no. 369: Letter of F.J. Miles to F.J. Krop (n.d.).

in the debates around Fetler's Dutch campaigns. In 1934, in one of his meetings with Grosheide, Fetler read the Confidential Report that had been written two years earlier. Fetler's reaction was furious. Krop's would-be Report was, in his opinion, "unjust, biased, deceitful and dishonest."<sup>65</sup> Fetler therefore accused Krop of slander. In his own view, Fetler had done more for the cause of the Russians than Krop had done in his whole life. "We can truly say that we, for more than a quarter of a century, tried to serve our Lord Jesus Christ with the best intentions...Our work has not been perfect and we have often failed, but God's grace has been with us in winning thousands of souls to Christ."<sup>66</sup>

After criticizing the Confidential Report, Fetler proposed a committee of leading Dutch ministers who would examine his campaigns from top to bottom and give a final judgment. This committee never materialized and the disagreement carried on. Fetler threatened Krop with indictments, just as he had done to other Dutch critics. Ironically Fetler's lawyer was Gerhardus Hendrik Adriaan Grosheide (1887-1963), the younger brother of Frederik Willem Grosheide. Meanwhile the elder Grosheide was the mediator trying to keep the work for Russia going despite the debates. It should be noted here that Krop and Fetler were both known to be stubborn and autocratic, and neither liked contradictory voices.<sup>67</sup>

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## Disturbing the missionary public

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The debates in the Dutch press and the disagreement among the leading Dutch theologians disturbed the Dutch missionary public. Loyal middle and lower class Dutch Protestants did not know which of the missionaries to support. The people who supported Schabert's campaigns were willing to support Fetler as well as his RMS, but they held back because of the open quarrels about Fetler's reliability. The confusion was heightened by the fact that the Dutch committees quarreled over the right attitude towards Communism. At the same time, the turmoil about Russian mission was seen as a huge problem. According to Krop's colleague Lasterie, the Dutch missionary public should somehow automatically know to whom and what they should give their money.<sup>68</sup> As the frictions tempered the dedication of Dutch Christians to the Russian mission, someone complained that the situation served to increase the power of Communism in Russia itself.<sup>69</sup>

Since the leading theologians of the Russian mission had failed to give convincing arguments in favor of Fetler, in June and July of 1934, the missionary public carried out its own investigation. Their activities increased the pressure on Grosheide as chairman of the Committee of Reference for the RMS. From Rotterdam, Baptist minister Koop

65 NA, inv. no 618: Memorandum of William Fetler on the accusations of Dr. Schabert, Dr. Krop and J. Lasterie, sent to the CBIZ, December 1934.

66 Ibid.

67 NA, inv. no 617: Correspondence between F.J. Krop and F.W. Grosheide, May-June 1934.

68 HDC, inv. no. 369: Letter of J.E. Lasterie to F.W. Grosheide, April 27, 1934.

69 NA, inv. no 618: Letter of A. Koning to M.C.T. van Lennep, n.d.

Reiling (1892-1973) and schoolmaster A. Smit asked for information on the Russian mission of Fetler. Mrs. Ubbink let Grosheide know of her suspicion that Reiling and Smit were instructed by Krop, reasoning that their letters and questions were almost the same.<sup>70</sup> In July 1934, Jan Willem Pieter van Schaardenburgh (1910-2005), a schoolmaster in Rijsoord, writing on behalf of a group of schoolmasters, wanted to know whether Fetler was reliable or not. In a letter to the CBIZ and Grosheide, Van Schaardenburgh cited at least twelve Dutch ministers from the Advisory Board of the RMS and other missionary organizations who had responded to Van Schaardenburgh's request for clarification. But the answers of these religious leaders were contradictory. Most of the ministers and theologians had not done anything to investigate Fetler's campaigns, and only supported Fetler because their colleagues did. Others referred Van Schaardenburgh to Krop or Grosheide and did not want to formulate a position. What the letter of Van Schaardenburgh did reveal was a lack of knowledge among the leading elites about the Fetler's activities and ideas. Grosheide for example, declared that he did not know about Fetler's extensive charitable-aid programs.<sup>71</sup>

On top of these internal organizational problems, Van Schaardenburgh openly questioned Fetler's orthodoxy. In his letter of July 1934, Van Schaardenburgh cited Grosheide's opinion on this

matter. He said he could not understand why Grosheide had trusted Fetler's religious orthodoxy when Fetler had rejected infant baptism and challenged those who believed in it. He asked: If Fetler were working in the Netherlands as a minister, would he challenge the Dutch churches in same way he had challenged the Protestants in Riga? And Van Schaardenburgh wanted to know about Fetler's Dutch revival conferences. In his letter, Van Schaardenburgh cites an article of Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), a Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologian at the Theological University in Kampen. Schilder's article in the orthodox-Protestant weekly *De Reformatie* was in response to an article about Fetler's conference by Klaas Dijk (1885-1968).<sup>72</sup> Both theologians characterized the conference as "a symptom of spiritual peculiarities that penetrate us." Schilder and Dijk negatively characterized the conference as an "Anglo-Methodist invasion" like the Oxford Movement, claiming that it imported all kinds of "spiritual exaggerations" that were not welcome.<sup>73</sup> Schilder and Dijk criticized the fact that the center at gravity of the conference was not the church, but the conference itself. "From the Conference back to the Church (should) be our motto" they suggested.<sup>74</sup> The arguments of Krop in May 1934 were already problematic for Grosheide, but the publications of Schilder and Dijk and the letter of Van Schaardenburgh, all of whom repre-

70 HDC, inv. no. 369: Letter of A.M. Ubbink to F.W. Grosheide, June 26, 1934.

71 HDC, inv. no. 371: Letter of J.W.P. van Schaardenburgh to the CBIZ, July 1934.

72 K. Schilder cites with agreement K. Dijk in a so-called *Persschouw* (press overview), based on an article of K. Dijk in the *Gereformeerde Kerkbode Den Haag*.

73 *De Reformatie*, July 6, 1934.

74 "Van de Conferentie naar de Kerk terug zij ons parool," *De Reformatie*, July 6, 1934.

sented the missionary public, was the last straw.

A few weeks after Van Schaardenburgh's letter, Grosheide resigned as chairman of the Committee of Reference for the RMS in the Netherlands in a statement published by the Dutch Christian Press Office.<sup>75</sup> He explained the reason for his resignation by saying that the workers of the Russian Missionary Society had started an evangelical missionary movement in the Netherlands itself.<sup>76</sup> This is an illustration of how Grosheide felt that he and the established Protestant churches in the Netherlands had been attacked by Fetler's "Dutch missionary action." In the end it meant that Fetler would be supported in his international work for Russians in the Baltic States and Russia, but he was not welcome to evangelize in the Netherlands. In his semi-public letter, which was sent through the missionary network of Russian missions in the Netherlands, Van Schaardenburgh wrote in an understatement that Grosheide's statement "can only be enlightening."<sup>77</sup> As Krop had already said in May 1934, Grosheide's opinion was the crucial element in the proliferation of Fetler's support in the

Netherlands. Other members of the Advisory Board for the RMS had primarily based their decision to support Fetler on Grosheide's judgment.

In October 1934, after Grosheide's resignation and the ensuing collapse of Fetler's official support, the Dutch Central Archive and Information Office on Social Relief<sup>78</sup> published its report on their investigation into Fetler's missionary campaigns. As the Central Archive was responsible for monitoring the Dutch relief work and philanthropic initiatives in the Netherlands, it had undergone a long period of investigation and consideration of Fetler's activities before sounding the warning against him. According to the Central Archive, the purchase of hotel Stadt Elberfeld made it clear that Fetler had started his revival campaigns in the Netherlands with help of Dutch philanthropy.<sup>79</sup> The Central Archive concluded that Fetler was not flawless, but they generally approved his philanthropic work. They felt that Fetler had not deliberately mislead the Dutch people, but he did cause misconceptions among the Dutch people because of his incorrect assessment of philanthropic opportunities. The general impression

75 Nederlands Christelijk Persbureau.

76 Grosheide's statement: "Ik zie mij genoodzaakt af te treden als lid van het Comité van Inlichtingen van het Russisch Zendingsgenootschap, omdat door de werkers van dit genootschap feitelijk een Evangelisatiearbeid in Nederland opgezet is." *De Heraut voor de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (August 26, 1934) cited the statement and the reaction from the *Gereformeerd Kerkblad*, in which the statement of Grosheide was received with thankfulness. See *Gereformeerd Kerkblad*. *Officieel orgaan van de Gereformeerde Kerk van Leeuwarden*, August 11, 1934.

77 HDC, inv. no. 371: Letter of J.W.P. van Schaardenburg to the CBIZ, July 1934.

78 The Central Archive was a non-ecclesiastical organization, succeeded by the Centraal Bureau voor Fondsenwerving (Central Bureau on Fundraising, CBF).

79 NA, inv. no. 616: Report concerning the Russian Missionary Society issued by the Central Archive and Information Office, n.d. According to the minutes of the Central Archive, this report was published on December 13, 1934. Amsterdam, Centraal Bureau Fondsenwerving, *Archief Centraal Archief Inlichtingenbureau inzake maatschappelijk hulpbetoon voor Nederland* (hereafter CBF), Box 34: Minutes of the board meetings of the Central Archive, 1933-1934.

of the board of the Central Archive was that the major opposition Fetler faced was not the result of substantiated complaints against Fetler's work, but rather it had its origin in competition between the ecclesiastical organizations.<sup>80</sup>

Fetler continued his work after Grosheide's resignation but met greater opposition. Only a few people maintained their support of him, chief among them: Anna Maria Ubbink. She declared that all alarming messages about Fetler were groundless and said she still trusted him absolutely, both personally and in his RMS campaigns.<sup>81</sup> In Bussum, Fetler tried to defend himself by organizing a public discussion with one of his critics, the local Evangelical minister Cornelis Johannes Hoekendijk (1873-1948). The *Bussumsche Courant* warned against Fetler and his methods.<sup>82</sup> The negative advice of Grosheide carried a lot of weight in these warnings.<sup>83</sup> Fetler responded to the *Bussumsche Courant* with irritation. He wanted to argue in a "British, chivalrous way," and did not condone what he called, "the stabbing in his back." On December 13, 1934, he

visited Bussum, accompanied by a large Macedonian choir. His behavior was received very negatively and led to more estrangement between Fetler and the Dutch missionary public.<sup>84</sup>

Another example from Zeeland further clarified the opposition. In April 1935, Fetler organized lectures there to collect money for his missionary work. Meanwhile the Protestant newspaper *De Zeeuw* published an extensive warning against his work. Grosheide, Krop and Hoekendijk were cited in the article as a way to warn the people of Zeeland.<sup>85</sup>

January 1936 spelled the end of Fetler's Dutch activities. Mr. Aleid Jonker (1879-1943), one of the board members of the Central Archive, told his fellow board members that Pastor Fetler, his wife and 13 children had left for Poland. According to his information, the Fetler family lived in deplorable conditions.<sup>86</sup> Attempts to renew Fetler's campaigns in the Netherlands were firmly rejected. For example, the missionary M.F. Dekkers, a former worker for Fetler in Hengelo, was strongly discouraged from restarting the work of the RMS in the Netherlands.<sup>87</sup>

80 Original quote in Dutch: "doch veeleer zijn oorsprong vindt in de door andere Kerkelijke Organen niet gaarne geziene concurrentie." CBF, Box 34: Minutes of the board meetings of the Central Archive, 1933-1934, Meeting November 17, 1934.

81 NA, inv. no. 617; Letter G. Ubbink to CBIZ, November 27, 1934.

82 "Russisch zendingsgenootschap en Dorus Rijkers-brochures," *De Bussumsche Courant. Algemeen Nieuwsblad voor het Gooi*, October 25, 1934; "Russisch Zendingsgenootschap," *De Bussumsche Courant. Algemeen Nieuwsblad voor het Gooi*, November 15, 1934.

83 "Verklaring van professor Grosheide," *De Bussumsche Courant. Algemeen Nieuwsblad voor het Gooi*, November 15, 1934.

84 "Het Russisch Zendingsgenootschap. Pastor Fetler komt zijn zaak persoonlijk toelichten," *De Bussumsche Courant. Algemeen Nieuwsblad voor het Gooi*, December 11, 1934; "Een zeer onwaardige reclame-vertooning. Pastor Fetler komt zich rechtvaardigen, vergezeld van een geheel Macedonisch zangkoor," *De Bussumsche Courant. Algemeen Nieuwsblad voor het Gooi*, December 13, 1934.

85 *De Zeeuw. Christelijk-historisch nieuwsblad voor Zeeland*, April 9, 1935.

86 CBF, Box 34: Minutes of the board meetings of the Central Archive, 1935-1936, Meeting January 11, 1936.

87 Ibid.: Meeting April 18, 1936. See also NA, inv. no. 617: Letters CBIZ, May 1936.





*A Swedish postcard of the Rainbow Orchestra of the Fetler Family in the 1930s.  
[Personal collection Mike Brubaker]*

## Conclusion

This article takes a close look at the dynamic interaction between well-established forms of Dutch Protestantism and religious newcomers on the periphery of Dutch society. The case of William Fetler demonstrates the willingness with which theologians from the NHK and GKN engaged in international cooperation that went beyond the borders of their own established religious groups. Notwithstanding the static attitude of the established churches towards newcomers, international missions were accepted as a valuable way to open up new horizons of cooperation. The Dutch churches responded enthusiastically to Fetler's call to action and his plea for spiritual and material support for

persecuted fellow Christians in Russia. Grosheide trusted Fetler and granted him access to the Dutch Protestant missionary public and Fetler's first attempts in the Netherlands were successful, in large measure thanks to the work of Mrs. Ubbink.

In this initial phase, membership in a transnational missionary network was more important than any real or imagined theological difference between Fetler and Dutch Protestants. The missionary public in Holland was shocked by the idea that Christians were being persecuted in Europe after a long period of religious freedom for Christians. The public wanted to pray for these fellow Christians and support them. In this article, I have only briefly analyzed of the attitude of Christians towards Commu-



nism; that historical field deserves more attention.<sup>88</sup>

Between 1932 and 1934, the tension grew within Fetler's network of support. Based on the international debates, Krop arranged a report in which he accused Fetler of a dictatorial, personality-orientated style of leadership and denounced his financial malfeasance. The RMS Advisory Board, presided over by Grosheide, were questioned by the missionary public about Fetler's reliability. Members of this public independently investigated Fetler's work and their findings increased the pressure on Fetler and weakened his support.

Fetler made the decision to come to the Netherlands to start a revival movement and organize an evangelization conference in Woudschoten in July 1934. Subsequent harsh criticism from the missionary public led to the resignation of Grosheide, who had been Fetler's main supporter within the GKN, and caused a general collapse of support among Dutch Protestants. The reasons for this change in attitude can be seen in the argument of Grosheide explaining his resignation and in the observations of the Central Archive and Information Office. Fetler's Dutch missionary activities had become a rival to the established order of Dutch Protestantism. At this point, his personality and supposed financial malpractice were not at issue. The change in opinion stems from the fact that Fetler's deviant theological views had become a threat to the established religious order. Fetler was no longer simply raising funds for

his mission in faraway Russia. He was actively engaging in proselytizing for his evangelical and Baptist theological views among Dutch Protestants.

We can get a better understanding of the attitude of Dutch Protestants towards the newcomer Fetler by comparing it with their approach to two other newcomers in this period: Frank Buchman and the Salvation Army. Buchman and Fetler shared evangelical charisma, they both had a focus on personal conversion and they believed in the individual's practical experience with Christ. These elements meshed with the ideas of those Dutch Christians who were searching for a practical way of "working" for Christ as opposed to those who only dogmatically "thought" about faith and salvation. Fetler's revivalist ideas converged with orthodox Christian views on the authority of Scripture, and this initially made him reliable a religious personality. Like Buchman, Fetler brought an open-minded religiosity with an international orientation, inviting Dutch Protestants to step beyond the strict borders of their own denominations. Buchman was, as is seen in the De Loor's research, kept away from the GKN, while the ministers of the NHK were more positive towards his movement.<sup>89</sup> In contrast to Fetler, Buchman succeeded in stabilizing his relationship with the Dutch churches, and was not seen as a direct rival. It would appear that Grosheide trivialized the evangelical undertone in Fetler's theology, because he was "far away" in Riga. It is certainly the case that Grosheide knew about Fetler's revival theology because

88 See for example the special issue of *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53 (2018) 3, edited by Todd H. Weir on twentieth-century culture wars.

89 De Loor, *Nieuw Nederland loopt van stapel*, 171.

he had read Fetler's *Fundamentals of Revival*.<sup>90</sup> In the first phase of cooperation, Fetler's orthodoxy was therefore beyond debate. In 1934, however, when Fetler organized his Woudschoten-conference in the Netherlands, he became a rival of the established religious order in the Netherlands, causing the resignation of his main supporter.

Fetler was by his very nature a rival of the established order. In addition, the Dutch missionary public already supported the charitable-aid projects of Oskar Schabert. Schabert was the main contact person going between the established churches and the Russian churches. He had solid organizational structures in the Netherlands and on an international level, and he operating outside the Netherlands. Fetler's missionary message, by contrast, required the crossing of established religious boundaries of denomination and ecclesiastical organizations. In this sense, taking sides with Fetler was the same step as becoming a member of the Salvation Army which required a full commitment to the Army. For most Dutch Protestants, this commitment was a bridge too far. They were willing to engage in some of the Army's activities but did not want to disconnect themselves from the established religious order.<sup>91</sup> Only Mrs. Ubbink, who thought of becoming a Baptist, was willing to break with the Dutch churches.<sup>92</sup>

This type of objections is the most convincing explanation for the cut-off of support for Fetler. Most Dutch Protestants were willing to support Fetler financially and spiritually on an international level but would not commit

fully to Fetler's missionary campaigns nor would they loosen their bond to the Dutch churches to which they belonged. The margins of Dutch Protestantism turned out to be narrower than realized once a religious newcomer like Fetler started to compete with the interests of the established Protestant order. And a careful study of the debates shows that the role of the missionary public in defining the limits of tolerance, was greater than expected. While Krop could not convince Grosheide of the danger of Fetler's revival campaign, the views of Van Schaardenburgh, Schilder and Dijk became critical in the decision to expel Fetler from the margins of Dutch Protestantism.

90 HDC, inv. no. 153: U1. Letter of A.M. Ubbink to F.W. Grosheide, August 11, 1931.

91 Ringelberg, *Met de vlag in top*, 153.

92 HDC, inv. no. 153: U1. Letter of A.M. Ubbink to F.W. Grosheide, August 11, 1931.

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## Abbreviations

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CBIZ: Centraal Bond voor Inwendige Zending  
GKN: Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland  
LIO: Licht im Osten  
LWC: Landelijk Werkcomité Dr. O. Schabert  
NECORUS: Nederlands Comité tot steun der  
Christenen in Rusland  
NHK: Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk  
RMS: Russian Missionary Society

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## Summary

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This article explores the dynamics of Dutch Protestantism in the interwar period, focusing on the case of the Latvian Baptist pastor William Fetler and his Russian Missionary Society. In 1931, Fetler started his campaign in the Netherlands. A broad coalition of religious elites from the established churches responded to his call to action and supported him in raising funds for Russian mission. Over time the actions of Fetler were accompanied by fierce debates surrounding his personality, theological position, and financial practices. Notwithstanding the fact that Fetler's opponents could not make substantial arguments against him, the debates continued until 1934. The debates in the Dutch press and the disagreement among the leading Dutch theologians disturbed the Dutch missionary public. The people who supported existing organisations for Russian missions were willing to support Fetler as well as his RMS, but they held back because of the open quarrels over Fetler's reliability. In 1934, the Dutch teacher Van Schaardenburgh argued that Fetler had started missionary activities within the Netherlands. Because of Fetler's Dutch revivalist movement, Grosheide decided to resign as chairman of the Committee of Reference for Fetler's action. Grosheide's resignation caused a collapse of support for Fetler in the Netherlands. Theological differences thus became highly problematic and caused Fetler's exit from the margins of Dutch Protestantism.

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## Personalia

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